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Local medical team sent to aid hurricane victims

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TORRINGTON - Harwinton residents Joanne and Mark R. Prete were bringing their oldest daughter back to college in Vermont when they heard hurricane Katrina had turned into a category 5 storm Sunday.

Mark Prete, vice president for medical affairs at Charlotte Hungerford Hospital, immediately realized what it could mean for him and his five fellow physicians at the hospital.

"He had the inkling that they may be called," Joanne Prete said Tuesday. "That same morning he did get a call."

Joanne Prete said her husband, who is also the chief medical officer for the state's Disaster Medical Assistance Team, flew to Atlanta early Monday morning to be with the rest of the team. Their mission was to get close to Katrina's damaged area and be on call for assistance.

Mark, who has been on the Medical Assistance Team for two years, has never been called up for an emergency, Joanne said. He served in the Army from 1983 to 1990 and trained to offer emergency medical treatment to Special Forces units, she said.

"This was just another opportunity for him to do real emergency medicine," she added. "To be where it's needed."

The Medical Assistance Team is sponsored by the state Department of Public Health and was formally established in August 2002. The team deploys with supplies and equipment to sustain itself for extended periods of time, according to a release from Gov. M. Jodi Rell's office. The team was activated at the request of the National Disaster Medical System, a section within the Department of Homeland Security.

"This volunteer team of two paramedics, a nurse, a medical doctor and a communications specialist will be deployed to area impacted by the hurricane," Rell said. "They will provide rapid-response element to supplement local medical care."

As of Tuesday evening, Joanne Prete said her husband was about 100 miles from the Gulf Coast in northern Alabama.

"As of 3 o'clock this afternoon, he was still waiting for his orders in terms of what he was specifically going to do," she said. "There's so much devastation that they really didn't know if it was safe yet for them to go and set up."

Connecticut residents are encouraged to donate funds to the American Red Cross to assist storm victims, Rell said. Contributions may be sent to the Disaster Relief Fund through local American Red Cross chapters or to the American Red Cross, P.O. Box 37243, Washington D.C. 20013. Secure online contributions can be made at www.redcross.org.

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